

Power to the People

The report of Power: an independent Inquiry into Britain's democracy

Executive Summary and Recommendations **(pp. 15-25 in *Power to the People*)**

Power was established to discover what is happening to our democracy. Why has disengagement from formal democratic politics in Britain grown in recent years and how can it be reversed?

Although the election of new leaders to the political parties and strategic repositioning has generated some renewed public interest in the drama of Westminster, it is our view that this is unlikely to have more than a cosmetic and short-lived effect. The problems run too deep.

The Commission of ten people from different backgrounds and with a variety of political views believes it is vital to re-engage the British people with formal democracy if the following are to be avoided:

- the weakening of the mandate and legitimacy for elected governments - whichever party is in power - because of plummeting turnout;
- the further weakening of political equality because whole sections of the community feel estranged from politics;
- the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors;
- the weakening of effective recruitment into politics;
- the rise of undemocratic political forces;
- the rise of a 'quiet authoritarianism' within government.

This report presents a detailed analysis of why this disengagement has occurred and a series of recommendations to address the problem. This is a broad agenda for major political reform.

Analysis of the Problem of Disengagement

The Myth of Apathy

Three fundamental characteristics of political disengagement in Britain have been particularly influential in *Power's* thinking about the causes of the problem.

- Contrary to much of the public debate around political disengagement, the British public are not apathetic. There is now a great deal of research evidence to show that very large numbers of citizens are engaged in community and charity work outside of politics. There is also clear evidence that involvement in pressure politics – such as signing petitions, supporting consumer boycotts, joining campaign groups – has been growing significantly for many years. In addition, research shows that interest in 'political issues' is high.

The area of decline is in formal politics: turnout for General Elections has declined very significantly since 1997; turnout for other elections has remained stubbornly low for years; party membership and allegiance has declined very severely over the last thirty years; elected representatives are held in very low esteem and widely distrusted.

- *Power's* own research and experience over the last eighteen months has established that the level of alienation felt towards politicians, the main political parties and the key institutions of the political system is extremely high and widespread.
- The problem of disengagement from formal democracy is not unique to Britain. Nearly all of the established democracies are suffering from similar problems.

Red Herrings

Based on these three characteristics and its own research, *Power* placed in doubt some of the analyses it has heard which claim to explain the rise of disengagement. Disengagement is NOT caused by:

- an apathetic and uninterested public with a weak sense of civic duty;
- a widespread economic and political contentment;
- the supposedly low calibre and probity of politicians;
- the lack of competitive elections (this may have a minor impact on election turnout but it needs to be set in the wider context of an electoral system which is widely perceived to lead to unequal and wasted votes);
- an overly negative news media;
- lack of time on the part of citizens.

The Reality

Power concluded that the following explanations stood up in the face of the evidence:

- citizens do not feel that the processes of formal democracy offer them enough influence over political decisions - this includes party members who feel they have no say in policy-making and are increasingly disaffected;
- the main political parties are widely perceived to be too similar and lacking in principle;
- the electoral system is widely perceived as leading to unequal and wasted votes;
- political parties and elections require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies;
- many people feel they lack information or knowledge about formal politics;

- voting procedures are regarded by some as inconvenient and unattractive.

The Rise of New Citizens

Many of these problems are hardly new. So why have these factors led to the problem of disengagement now? And why is this a problem across many established democracies?

The deeper cause behind these factors is the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. Post-industrialisation has had two major impacts relevant to the issue of disengagement. The first is the creation of a large section of British society which is now better educated, more affluent, expects greater control and choice over many aspects of life, feels no deference towards those in positions of authority, and is not as bound by the traditional bonds of place, class and institution that developed during the industrial era. The second is the creation of permanently marginalised groups in society which live in persistent poverty, with low educational attainment, poor working and living conditions and a multiplicity of other deprivations associated with life on low or very low incomes.

However, the British political system is structured as though the lifestyles, expectations and values of the industrial era are still in place. Citizens have changed.

This profound shift has caused two major disjunctions between the system and citizens.

- The British parliamentary system of elected representation and considerable executive power was built in an era of very limited educational provision and in which deference and rigid hierarchy, and static social relations were taken for granted.
- The British party system is based on the dominance of two parties constructed around the pursuit of the interests and ideological leanings of the two dominant classes that existed during the industrial era.

This explains why so many British citizens now no longer feel formal democracy offers them the influence, equality and respect they believe is their due and why the main parties are widely regarded as unattractive or irrelevant despite the parties efforts to reinvent themselves. Alienation from politics takes many forms for different groups – women, black and minority ethnic communities, those on low incomes, young people - ranging from a general sense that the system is out-of-date to a deep disgust at the fact that politics has failed to bring about fundamental improvements in the lives of the most disadvantaged. Fundamentally, however, all of these alienations are exacerbated by a political system that cannot respond to the diverse and complex values and interests of the individuals which make up our post-industrial society.

The response of the political system to post-industrialism and to political disengagement has been either technocratic or self-interested in the sense that the parties have adapted their policies and campaigning simply to win elections. The political strategy of “triangulation”, for example, is democracy by numbers. It is a mathematical equation that secures power but in the end drives down people’s desire to be politically engaged. It hollows out democracy because it inevitably means by-passing party members who want debate and neglects the democratic channels of engagement which might get in the way of the strategy.

By contrast, the Power commission has developed a response to disengagement which is democratic. This has drawn on an understanding of democracy which sees the concept as a set of

broad principles which can be applied in a variety of ways beyond a simple focus on representative institutions and elections.

The Response to the Problem of Disengagement

Power has set its recommendations within the context of a changed society. These recommendations primarily aim to create a political system which allows citizens a more direct and focused influence on the political decisions that concern them. It is also an attempt to bring greater flexibility and responsiveness to politics so that new alliances can form and new ways of debating be generated. There have to be real opportunities and spaces where the changing values in our society can be fed into politics.

The recommendations are based on three major shifts in political practice:

- a rebalancing of power away from the executive and unaccountable bodies towards Parliament and local government;
- the introduction of greater responsiveness and choice into the electoral and party systems;
- allowing citizens a much more direct and focused say over political decisions and policies.

These three imperatives stand or fall alongside each other. The implementation of only one or two of the three will not create the re-engagement with formal democracy which many people now want. Cherry picking – a folly repeated time and time again by our political masters - will not work.

Rebalancing Power

There needs to be a re-balancing of power between the constituent elements of the political system: a shift of power away from the Executive to Parliament and from central to local government. Much greater clarity, transparency and accountability should be introduced into the relationship between the Executive and supra-national bodies, quangos, business, and interest groups. Too much power goes unchecked. The aim here is to allow the freedom for our elected representatives to be the eyes, ears and mouth of British citizens at the heart of government.

Recommendations

1. A Concordat should be drawn up between Executive and Parliament indicating where key powers lie and providing significant powers of scrutiny and initiation for Parliament.
2. Select Committees should be given independence and enhanced powers including the power to scrutinise and veto key government appointments and to subpoena witnesses to appear and testify before them. This should include proper resourcing so that Committees can fulfil their remit effectively. The specialist committees in the Upper house should have the power to co-opt people from outside the legislature who have singular expertise, such as specialist scientists, when considering complex areas of legislation or policy.
3. Limits should be placed on the power of the whips.

4. Parliament should have greater powers to initiate legislation, to launch public inquiries and to act on public petitions.
5. 70 per cent of the members of the House of Lords should be elected by a 'responsive electoral system' – and not on a closed party list system - for three parliamentary terms. To ensure that this part of the legislature is not comprised of career politicians with no experience outside politics, candidates should be at least 40 years of age.
6. There should be an unambiguous process of decentralisation of powers from central to local government.
7. A Concordat between central and local government setting out their respective powers.
8. Local government to have enhanced powers to raise taxes and administer its own finances.
9. Government should commission an independent mapping of quangos and other public bodies to clarify and renew lines of accountability between elected and unelected authority.
10. Ministers' meetings with representatives of business including lobbyists to be logged and listed on a monthly basis.
11. A new overarching select committee should be established to scrutinise the Executive's activities in supranational bodies and multilateral negotiations, particularly in relation to the European Union, and to ensure these activities are held to account and conducted in the best interests of the British people.

Real Parties and True Elections

The current way of doing politics is killing politics. An electoral and party system which is responsive to the changing values and demands of today's population should be created. This will allow the development of new political alliances and value systems which will both regenerate existing parties and also stimulate the creation of others.

Recommendations

12. A responsive electoral system should be introduced for elections to the House of Commons, House of Lords and Local Councils in England and Wales to replace the first-past-the-post system.
13. The closed party list system to have no place in modern elections.
14. The system whereby candidates have to pay a deposit which is lost if their votes fall below a certain threshold should be replaced with a system where the candidate has to collect the signatures of a set number of supporters in order to appear on the ballot paper.
15. The Electoral Commission should take a more active role in promoting candidacy so that more women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people on lower incomes, young people and independents are encouraged to stand.

16. The voting and candidacy age should be reduced to sixteen (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).
17. The introduction of automatic, individual voter registration at age sixteen. This can be done in tandem with the allocation of National Insurance numbers.
18. The citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification.
19. Donations from individuals to parties should be capped at £10,000, and organisational donations capped at £100 per member, subject to full democratic scrutiny within the organisation.
20. State funding to support local activity by political parties to be introduced based on the allocation of individual voter vouchers. This would mean that at a general election a voter will be able to tick a box allocating a £3 donation per year from public funds to a party of his or her choice to be used by that party for local activity. It would be open to the voter to make the donation to a party other than the one they have just voted for.
21. Text voting or email voting should only be considered following other reform of our democratic arrangements.
22. The realignment of constituency boundaries should be accelerated.

Downloading Power

We should be creating a culture of political engagement in which it becomes the norm for policy and decision-making to occur with direct input from citizens. This means reform which provides citizens with clear, entitlements and procedures by which to exercise that input - from conception through to implementation of any policy or decision.

Recommendations

23. All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes.
24. Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.
25. The rules on the plurality of media ownership should be reformed. This is always a controversial issue but there should be special consideration given to this issue in light of the developments in digital broadcast and the internet.
26. A requirement that Public service broadcasters develop strategies to involve viewers in deliberation on matters of public importance - this would be aided by the use of digital technology.
27. MPs should be required and resourced to produce Annual Reports, hold AGMs and make more use of innovative engagement techniques.
28. Ministers' meetings with campaign groups and their representatives should be logged and

listed on a monthly basis.

29. The creation of a new independent National Statistical and Information Service to provide the public with key information free of political spin.

30. ‘Democracy hubs’ should be established in each local authority area. These would be resource centres based in the community where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system.

Change of this magnitude cannot be left simply to elected representatives. An alliance for change needs to be built amongst the most clear-sighted MPs, local councillors, MEPs and members of the devolved institutions, but only a sustained campaign for change from **outside** the democratic assemblies and parliaments of the UK will ensure that meaningful reform occurs. We, the people, have to stake our claim on power.

The **Executive Summary & Recommendations** is from *Power to the People* (pp.15-25) published by The Power Inquiry in March 2006 (ISBN 0 9550303 15). Copies of *Power to the People* are available from: York Publishing Distribution, 64 Hallfield Road, York, YO31 7ZQ. Email: orders@yps-publishing.co.uk.